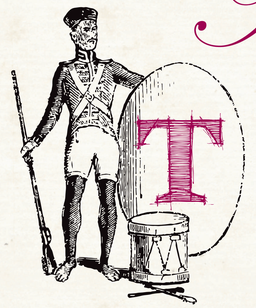
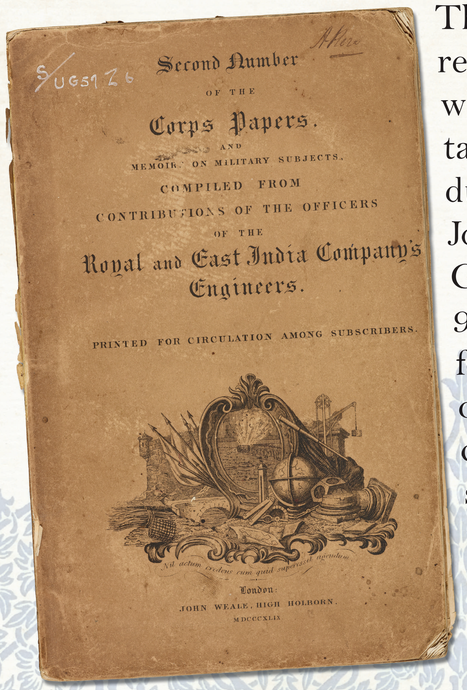
Rule and resistance: the Company Army and the Vellore Mutiny



The military was at the forefront of both rule and resistance in colonial India.

The British East India Company's access to trade routes and tax revenues was based on its ability to defeat Indian armies in battle, and exploit divisions between Indian rulers by forging alliances and promising protection. Military success was vital to the company's power and reputation.



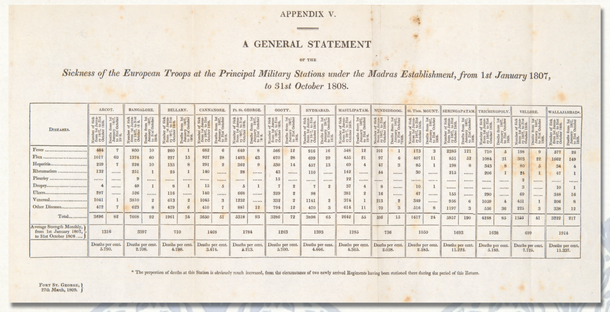
The East India Company retained its own army, which provided defence, tax collection and police duties. Referred to by Sir John Shore, Governor General of India (1793–98), as the 'mass which forms the bulwark of our power', the army comprised nearly 100,000 soldiers by the turn of the century.

The two volumes of *Corps papers, and memoirs on military subjects, compiled from contributions of the officers of the Royal Engineers and the East India Company's engineers (1849)*. Special Collection Oversize UG57.Z6.

The Siege of Moultan [Multan, in modern-day Pakistan] took place during 1848-1849, and triggered the Second Anglo-Sikh War. The siege began when the predominantly Muslim city rebelled against a Sikh ruler imposed by the East India Company. The East India Company's eventual victory consolidated their rule in Northern India. From *Corps papers, and memoirs on military subjects, compiled from contributions of the officers of the Royal Engineers and the East India Company's engineers (1849)*. Special Collection Oversize UG57.Z6

The majority of the company's army was manned by Indian troops, or 'sepoys.' The company treated them significantly worse than European soldiers, imposing harsh discipline, and denying shelter and sometimes pay.

Resistance to East India Company power was most effective in the form of military mutiny and rebellion. Although the company was beset by minor mutinies during the 18th century, the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 took place on an unprecedented scale. The official reports on the mutiny blamed a change of headdress from a turban to a topi, a Portuguese cap worn by drummers, which was made with leather. Fearing attempts to convert them to Christianity, Hindu and Muslim sepoys argued that wearing the topi would threaten their caste status. Their concerns unheeded, they rose up in arms on 10th July, killing 150 European soldiers and officers until the garrison was relieved by Colonel Gillespie. His suppression of the mutiny, followed by mass, summary executions left nearly 800 sepoys dead.


APPENDIX V.

A GENERAL STATEMENT
OF THE
Sickness of the European Troops at the Principal Military Stations under the Madras Establishment, from 1st January 1807, to 31st October 1808.

Diseases.	ARCOT.	BANGALORE.	BELLARY.	CANNANORE.	PALAMCOTTAH.	SALEM.	SEETAPORE.	SYDNABAD.	TRICHINOPOLY.	VELLORE.	WALLAJANAGUR.	WINDHAMAL.	WYNAAD.	N. Viss. MOUNT.	SERINGAPATAM.	TRICHINOPOLY.	VELLORE.	WALLAJANAGUR.
Fever	488	7	800	19	895	1	662	6	649	8	566	12	812	16	546	19	302	1	173	3	2265	121	750	3	198	9	677	89
Flux	1017	60	1218	60	977	13	922	38	1402	42	670	39	629	29	916	46	97	8	497	11	651	52	1084	31	1015	69	1060	149
Hepatitis	219	7	224	17	155	8	201	2	282	9	250	14	277	15	192	4	68	4	87	3	30	—	343	9	91	5	288	8
Rheumatism	135	—	213	1	93	1	180	—	99	—	87	—	110	—	137	—	59	—	30	—	212	—	205	1	84	1	47	1
Pleurisy	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	12	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dropsy	4	—	7	4	—	—	14	—	1	—	1	—	2	2	3	—	1	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	10	1
Cholera	397	—	500	—	118	—	140	—	698	—	328	2	98	—	321	2	9	—	9	—	55	—	480	—	49	—	130	4
Wounded	1161	1	1010	7	672	2	1062	7	1210	—	322	3	1141	3	514	1	213	2	259	—	216	—	1620	6	452	1	366	9
Other Diseases	402	7	429	8	429	6	442	2	487	12	376	12	405	3	318	11	70	3	210	8	1197	3	540	26	221	3	356	12
Total	3856	82	7616	82	1961	34	3650	57	5218	93	3350	72	3676	63	2962	83	206	18	1817	74	5017	180	4340	83	1340	41	3252	317
Average Strength Monthly, from 1st January 1807, to 31st October 1808	1216		2397		710		1403		1794		1213		1393		1194		736		1510		1693		1626		499		1914	
	Deaths per cent. 8.720.		Deaths per cent. 3.166.		Deaths per cent. 4.366.		Deaths per cent. 3.454.		Deaths per cent. 4.515.		Deaths per cent. 4.559.		Deaths per cent. 4.846.		Deaths per cent. 4.024.		Deaths per cent. 3.036.		Deaths per cent. 4.004.		Deaths per cent. 11.010.		Deaths per cent. 4.886.		Deaths per cent. 5.756.		Deaths per cent. 11.337.	

* The proportion of deaths at this Station is obviously much increased, from the circumstance of two newly arrived Regiments having been stationed there during the period of this Return.

FORT ST. GEORGE, 1st March, 1809.

Despite the rebellions, the biggest cause of death for European soldiers stationed in India was always disease, not combat.

From *Practical observations on fever, dysentery, and liver complaints: as they occur amongst the European troops in India* by George Ballingall. Med Chi Collection WB152 BAL.